7: Thompson--373-374 J-4 (no date) 1937 Laotians
116, 526, 535

"Unlike the Cambodians, the Laotians hold the dance in little honour. Only at certain fêtes do male dancers mimic like the Indians, and they are always accompanied by song. There are no professional dancers as in the royal and mandarinal palaces of Cambodia. The only corps de ballet that exists is at Luang-Prabang, and it is made up of little boys. Games of skill are much more pleasing to the Laotians. Boxing and wrestling, ball games, [374] and, above all, boat races take place at every festival, or as often as the Laotians can think of an excuse to have them. There is something in the temporary competitive and voluntary character of the effort required by games, as well as the change to bet on the outcome, that makes such activity irresistible to the Laotians, who hate the routine drudgery of daily toil, which is inexplicably enough the Occidental ideal."

23: Franck--297-298 T-2 (1924) 1926 Laotians
116, 226, 501, 526

"Huge fish are caught in the Mekong, weighing a hundred and fifty, two hundred, sometimes even two hundred and fifty--not pounds, but kilograms, fish so big that it takes ten men to carry one of them and one man to carry a severed head. It is easy to understand what the flap of such a fish-tail sometimes means to the fishermen in their frail vine-tied canoes. But it is just the fishing for such a people in such a climate; for every time they catch a fish they can--and usually do--[298] rest for a week without going hungry. Racing pirogues as much as twenty paces long lie bottom up on bamboo-horses under little thatch roofs here and there upon the high weed-grown river-bank at the edge of the capital, being used only in November during the annual regattas. For rowing--more exactly paddling--is the athletic sport of Luang Prabang."

764 some forty meters long folded across its width until it was the size of a man's hand (with thumb and little finger spread). The strip was unrolled ahead of the coffin and was held by the youngest of the dead person's sons, who led the mourning. Then the bonzes, relatives, officials and best friends of the deceased took positions on each side and held on to the strip with one hand, as we would hold on to pall-bearers' cords. Thus constituted, the procession set off ahead of the coffin, drawing it along in a manner of speaking.

Tom-toms, gongs, cymbals, clarinets and the Laotian organ were heard during the processional, as well as songs and improvisations. When it reached the funeral pyre the procession circled it three times and deposited the coffin on it.

The spectators then took up positions under sheltering bushes, in shady spots or even in full sunlight, depending on their rank. All was in readiness to light the fire, which was to be provided by the Governor of the province, a delegate of the king of Luang-Prabang who is the "master of life" (1), for the deceased was a high official.

[643] (1) The king of Luang-Prabang bears the title Tiao-Tsi-Vit, master of life.

[208] One important rite still remained to be performed: the last ablutions of water and brandy on the face, chest and hands of the body.

Then men climbed up on the pyre and removed the canopy of the catafalque, leaving the bamboo frame showing through the torn wrapping. They broke the lid of the coffin into splinters with great ax blows and thus exposed the body of the deceased, which exuded such a strong odor that all the spectators on the leeward side fell back.

The final toilet took place at this time. The men who do this work absorb such quantities of brandy to drive off miasmas and stimulate their own courage that their gestures and merriment, at such a time and place, would seem to us to be out of place. But here things 764 are not seen in the same light, and the gesticulations of all these folk • 526 armed with axes and various containers and their grotesque attitudes around the open coffin merely stimulate the spectators' joy. The 527 songs and music had not ceased, and wrestling matches and animal combats were about to take place. The wrestlers took the measure of one another and came to grips with their hands flat open, while the

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boxers pummeled one another with their fists. Their hands were smeared with a mixture of oil and soot so that they would leave a mark wherever they hit. The tilters were hot and eager, but did not greatly hurt one another, for their chief effort was to attract attention by means of gestures and plastic attitudes which would impress the girls and women with their supple, nervous and muscular bodies, shining like bronze under the sun because of the sweat which the effort of fighting brought on.

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Combats between buffaloes followed these amusements, then cocks were brought on and the whole audience crowded around. Passions rose to a fever pitch in the whole mass of spectators, who had been imbibing brandy freely. Ironic clamors rained down on the men who had let themselves be beaten and whose faces were smeared with black on their return, while enthusiastic shouts greeted the victors. In spite of all the excitement, the sun, the heat and the brandy, the whole mass of people remained quite moderate and the festivities [209] [Illustration] [210] [Blank page] [211] always kept a gay and gracious air. The enthusiasm for the fighters, the shouts and the bravos only lasted for a moment, and all of them, both lucky and unlucky, were sponged, given drink and cherished with equal solicitude so that they soon forgot their momentary rivalry.

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Children of both sexes then approached the pyre. They had all fastened their sampots and skirts in view of what was to happen next. Sacks were brought which were full of copper coins, to which a few silver coins had been added. Members of the family of the deceased then climbed up on the pyre and threw this small change broadcast into the horde of children. An indescribable tumult followed, accompanied by sharp cries. There was quarreling and fighting, and many little pairs of hands could be seen grabbing for the same copper coins. All of them would have liked to get the few white coins.

The parents and older people watched the coin hunt, which reminded them of the time when they were children and at the same time reminded them of the name of a dead man whose family had been generous to them once in similar circumstances.

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Now all the ritual ceremonies had been accomplished and it remained only to proceed to the last one: setting fire to the pyre.

Stiff lengths of rattan were attached to the four corners of the catafalque and fastened to the ground with stakes. Rockets slid along the lengths of rattan, and when the time came they would shoot up and supposedly light the pyre. In reality this is only a

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Sports and games. These are widespread in Laos.

"Boxing has fervent disciples there, as does flat-handed wrestling. Some of the champions have remarkable professional skill, agility and cleverness which never lose their elegance.

"The Laotians play with balls and shuttlecocks, but without using either their hands or rackets. Any other part of the body, for example, from the foot to the head, may be used to return a ball or shuttlecock. Nearly all young people play this extremely graceful game, which requires great suppleness, a quick eye and perfect ease of movement, which in this game should be neither jerky nor violent (1).

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(1) This game is also played in Burma, whence it was doubtless imported into Laos. The ball is made of large-mesh rattan latticework and is spherical in form with a diameter of ten to twelve centimeters. The shuttlecock is half-spherical. It is of similar construction, covered with cloth and provided with feathers along the edge. (Author's note.)

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"Like all Orientals, Laotians have a passion for games of chance in any form. This is the race's only real vice, and the French administration is obliged to maintain active surveillance over it.

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"A form of chess, more complicated than the game played in Europe, is widely played, and a few players are highly reputed for their perfect grasp of the game." (Le Laos français.)

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Celebrations and festivals. In addition to the legal public holidays, the temperament of the Laotians leads them to celebrate a great many others, for the most diverse and the most futile reasons. In principle, the Laotian makes no expenditures to ameliorate his daily fare and the pleasures of the table, as far as choice foods go, are indifferent to him. This does not prevent him, however, from organizing celebrations among relatives, friends and neighbors which anyone can attend without being specially invited. This custom of giving public festivities, or "Ngans" to use the native term, where everyone eats and drinks, has a good time, jokes and makes love, shows the friendly side of the Laotian character and the extreme sociability of the people. Those whose personal resources are too limited to cover the expenses of a "Ngan" either join with others in similar straits or go skirmishing through the city or village in search of the money, food, brandy and wax needed to accomplish their plan.

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182 Those desirous of obtaining special graces give similar celebrations which last several days and several nights, and the offerings are more beautiful and more varied. It is generally on occasions of this sort that assumptions of the habit by bonzes and their pupils are particularly likely to occur.

Being present at these ceremonies confers certain indulgences, and that is why they are so punctually followed and why all those who take part try [224] to help in celebrating them by offerings of all sorts.

[196] On the spot where the celebration is to be held, a sort of pulpit is constructed beforehand where the bonzes stand as they come up by turns to read passages chosen for the occasion from the sacred books. They never allow themselves to be disturbed by the surrounding noise, but stand as if transfixed in the middle of the songs and shouts.

It is readily understandable that this should be an agreeable way to procure one's salvation, but since it is very costly it is not within everyone's means. Fortunately, there are ways of compromising with [565] heaven which enable even the poorest to associate themselves in these great celebrations, in accordance with their resources, by means of even very modest offerings and to benefit therefrom both spiritually and materially.

There is no doubt but that a belief in the efficacy of plenary and partial indulgences enters into their consideration, but it is equally reasonable to suppose that the attraction of the profane pleasures which one enjoys in the course of these gatherings is not the least of the motivating causes which lead the Laotian people to frequent them so zealously.

[71] Pirogue races. We have seen that pirogue races and regattas took place during some of the legal holidays, and a few words of explanation on this matter are given below.

●526
501 This custom must have been introduced by the Malays and then handed down from the Kmers to the Laotians, following an ascending direction from south to north.

The pirogues used in the "Souang-Hua" (1) regattas are specially

(1) Literally, pirogues which run.

built and exclusively reserved for this use. Sometimes as much as twenty-five meters in length, they are hewn out of specially chosen wood and have most elegant delicate and elongated lines. Their extremities are armed with what appear to be slender gilded horns. The exterior is lacquered black with gold ornamentation and the

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inside is lacquered red.

The pirogues are manned by forty or fifty oarsmen who half [225] [Illustration] [226] [Blank page] [227] crouch and half sit in pairs on what amount to thwarts made of bamboo and joined to a framework. The oarsmen face forward as they paddle, holding their blade in both hands and not supporting it on any point of the boat. A pirogue chief, usually a mandarin, is in the prow, and in the stern is the pilot, who jumps about and stimulates the whole crew with his shouts and gestures. Amidships there are sometimes musicians, with kene, gong and tom-tom, and two or three trained men who, their belts [Illustration here] adorned with enormous jointed "lingams," dance the "Phallic" standing up with their feet on the edges of the pirogue and declaim occasional odes and improvisations the terms of which are extremely crude.(1). In their songs they invite beings,

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(1) In southern Laos the men who perform these dances hold grotesque masks in front of their faces with their hands.

plants and elements to unite, combine and fertilize one another so as to maintain "Life" in all its forms on the surface of the earth.

The crews of the different racing pirogues are clothed in different colors, like the jackets of our jockeys, and they vie ardently with one another, making the water fly to surpass their own efforts. The crew which reaches the finish line first manifests its enthusiasm by [228] standing up in the pirogue, uttering shouts of triumph and brandishing the oars. Oftentimes all these uncoordinated movements result in throwing everybody into the water, but the pirogue is soon righted and emptied to the accompaniment of roars of laughter and the crew members take up their posts again, ready for a new race.

Racing pirogues are not launched until the time when they are to be used. Ordinarily they are stored on sawhorses and under sheds on the grounds of certain pagodas whose bonzes are responsible for their upkeep, and for storing the oars and accessories and clothing of the oarsmen.

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Certain pirogues are held in common by the inhabitants of a village, while others are the property of particular rich men, muong chiefs or high mandarins who have had them built at their own expense and pay for their upkeep and for that of their crew of oarsmen. In Laos a man will become the owner of a racing pirogue as in France one might become the owner of a racing stable. The racehorse

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Tribal Tai

: the long pirogue, and the jockeys are the oarsmen. Nor will it be in vain to remark that, as in our races, heavy wagers are often laid by the owners and the lovers of this kind of sport.

619 Thais or Phou-Thais. The Thais or Phou-Thais are divided into four distinct groups. These are:

144 1. The Khao-Thais (white);

2. The Dam-Thais (black);

175 3. The Deng-Thais (red);

4. The Neua-Thais (northern).

The Khao-Thais are the result of marriages between Chinese men and Dam-Thai women, or vice versa, although the former case is the most frequent. They do not form large agglomerations, but only isolated family groups in the midst of the surrounding population. They are found only in the northern part of the Sib-Song-Chau-Thais, a territory which is dependent on Laos from the ethnographic point of view but administratively attached to Tonkin.

The following is what is known of their origin: [229] [Illustration] [230] [Blank page] [231]

"Around 1600 a rebel Chinese leader assembled a few partisans, set sail from Canton and landed at Haiphong. From there he went on to Bac-Ninh, continually increasing the number of his men. At Bac-Ninh the rebel leader received an envoy from the king of Annam, who asked him to help put down the Thais and the Muongs of the Black River. The Chinese leader accepted, and after leaving Bac-Ninh he went to Lao-Kay, from which point he soon entered the province of the Sib-Sing-Chau-Thais. After defeating the Thais and the Muongs he was given this province out of gratitude for his help. His troops, worn out by the campaign, settled in the country and lost no time in marrying Thai women. It was from such unions that the white Thais were born" (1).

(1) E. Picanon, op. cit. [Le Laos français, Paris, 1901.]

619 Dam-Thais and Deng-Thais . These two varieties have a common origin and belong to the same family (2). The different names which

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(2) Thais are found in nearly all of Laos, where they are scattered among the Laotian population. They are particularly numerous in the Hua-Pahn, where they are in the majority in certain muongs.

796 a hermit and said to them: "If you think of your mother, build little
773 illuminated boats and let them be carried away by the current on the fifteenth day of the eleventh month."

This rite is common to all the Asiatic countries of the monsoon. It is found in Lower Burma where it is said to celebrate the victory of the monk Oupagoutta over Mara. It is also practised in Cambodia, southern China at Amoy, in Borneo and in Japan.

Actually we are dealing with what Sir J. Frazer called the expulsion of the emissary he-goat. "These little rafts loaded with offerings attracted the evil genii who had been in contact with the living during the rains. They are driven away on board these frail skiffs." The expulsion of the emissary goat is often accompanied by licentious scenes similar to those of ancient Saturnalia and Bacchanalia.

[526] The race of the dugouts was originally intended to bring about the fall of the waters, but apparently it seems that in Vientiane, in spite of offerings made to the Nagas of the Nam Passak, the original idea has been lost, and the dugout race has become simply a sporting event.

The Feasts of the Twelfth Month.

796 When King Asoka had completed the 84,000 shrines which he
643 had built to contain the ashes of the Buddha, he made a great feast of the That on the fifteenth day of the crescent moon of the twelfth month. The feasts of the That Luang are celebrated in memory of this pious deed.

At Vientiane they are preceded by the feast of Vat Si Muong and conclude with those of the Vat Ong Tu [46] and Impeng (see appendix: Vientiane). They always involve the same ceremonial, circumambulation around the pagoda with small sticks of wax and incense, offerings to the bonzes, etc....

The day before the feast of That Luang, on the fourteenth day of the crescent moon, the Great Oath takes place. The king goes to the pagoda of Vat Ong Tu. All the high dignitaries and principal office-holders of the kingdom are present. The bonzes chant the ritual prayers. Two Kha guards in red tunics and green sampots, red berets with a pompon on their heads similar to the headdress worn by warriors represented at the Bayon of Angkor Thom, plunge the points of the sabres, guns and lances into four begging bowls containing lustral water. The master of ceremonies recites the oath written on palm leaves three times. Then the water in which the weapons have been dipped is distributed to the principal dignitaries who drink it.